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The breakthrough of Podemos in Spain poses a serious challenge for the country's two-party system



In contrast to other countries across Europe which saw the emergence of Eurosceptic and far-right parties during the European Parliament elections, the story in Spain was the breakthrough of the left-wing 'Podemos' ('We can'), who secured eight per cent of the country's vote despite only being formed shortly before the election. [Paul Kennedy](#) writes on the party's development and the impact it could have on the Spanish party system ahead of the 2015 Spanish general election. He notes that Podemos, which is closely linked to the '15-M' protest movement that began in 2011, has the potential to win votes from those who have traditionally supported the main centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party. One of the key decisions affecting its success, however, is likely to be whether it chooses to align with other smaller parties in Spain, such as those in the 'Plural Left' coalition.

[Podemos](#) (We can) was responsible for causing the greatest upset at Spain's European Parliamentary elections: it established itself as Spain's fourth most popular party, having obtained eight per cent of the vote and five seats. Established just two months before the elections, and still without formal organisational bodies or card-carrying members, Podemos essentially emerged during the actual election campaign, although the party/social movement is inextricably linked with the [15-M protest movement](#) which began in May 2011 in response to the effects of an economic crisis which has left one-in-four Spaniards (and over half of under-25s) without a job.



Pablo Iglesias Turrión, spokesperson for Podemos, Credit: David Fernández (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Those supporting Podemos are organised into some four hundred ‘circles’ or work groups scattered throughout neighbourhoods and towns throughout Spain, with thousands of sympathisers submitting policy suggestions which were included in the party’s 36-page programme. More of a wish list than a fully-costed manifesto, many voters nevertheless liked what they saw.

Claiming that the existing political establishment has failed in its fundamental duty of genuinely representing the electorate, Podemos is now firmly viewed as the embodiment of the 15-M movement’s attempts to secure political representation in existing political institutions so as to challenge a political and economic status quo based on the acceptance of EU-imposed austerity policies. Podemos attracted support from left-of-centre voters who have lost faith in the capacity of the [Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party](#) (PSOE), which presided over the intensification of the downturn between 2008 and 2011, to address the crisis and have resisted the rival charms of the [Izquierda Plural](#) (Plural Left) coalition comprising the Communist-dominated [Izquierda Unida](#) (IU – United Left) and [Greens](#).

Throughout the campaign, there was a significant personalisation around the figure of Pablo Iglesias, a 35-year-old politics lecturer who was presented as the face of Podemos to the extent of his image appearing on voting slips. The son of Socialist parents, the former Communist Party youth member was named after the founding father of the PSOE, the equivalent of the British Labour Party’s Keir Hardie. It is therefore ironic that the PSOE appears to have most to fear from the emergence of Podemos, but, judging from the opprobrium heaped on the party over recent weeks, consternation is felt across the political spectrum. ‘Weirdos’; ‘populists’; ‘catastrophic, offering Hugo Chávez- style utopias which would lead to unmitigated disaster’ are just some of the more choice examples directed at Iglesias and Podemos. The insults have proved counterproductive, if anything providing a further fillip to the arriviste as it goes from strength to strength.

Podemos was able to capitalise on Iglesias’s numerous television appearances, in which his articulate criticisms of the austerity policies backed by Chancellor Merkel and the Troika resonated with a sympathetic – and substantial – audience which agreed with the party’s key

conclusion that the dominant political class is incapable of proposing an economic strategy opposed to that imposed by the markets. Taking full advantage of the possibilities offered by social media to get its message across, and therefore able to challenge the all-pervasive media presence of the major parties, Podemos was equipped with the means of introducing itself to the electorate in a highly effective manner. Moreover, it was able to attract sufficient financial backing via crowdfunding to secure the support of one-and-a-quarter million voters.

Opinion polling carried out by Metroscopia for the centre-left newspaper El País indicates that around half of Podemos voters are aged between 35 and 54, a similar proportion having backed either the PSOE or IU at the 2011 general election, with those under 35 accounting for 34 per cent of the vote. Over half of those voting for Podemos nevertheless indicated that they would not rule out voting for the PSOE at the 2015 general election, despite the fact that Iglesias has ruled out any possibility of a future alliance with the PSOE. Around half of Podemos voters were employed, whilst around one-in-five was educated to university level. The party's support base therefore hardly consists of a majority of people experiencing an insecure situation within the labour market; much less are they socially marginalised.

Those threatened with eviction from their properties due to the difficulty of keeping up mortgage payments, collectives representing the unemployed and young people faced with seeking work abroad given the absence of opportunities in Spain nevertheless continue to offer an obvious constituency for Podemos in the local, regional and national elections due to be held during the course of 2015. Rejecting accusations that Podemos was little more than a protest vote, Iglesias has on the contrary claimed that its aim was to work towards and derive benefit from the decline of the PSOE and [People's Party](#) (PP) and transform the party into a force capable of entering government.

The combined vote of the PSOE and PP constituted less than half of the overall vote (compared to 81 per cent in 2009), with both parties combined losing more than five million votes, indicating that the days of a two-party system leaving little room for alternative parties may be numbered: eight smaller parties obtained representation in the European Parliament in 2014 with 41 per cent of the vote compared to just four in 2009 with 14 per cent of the vote. It remains to be seen, however, whether this shift is replicated at next year's general election, although neither major party has grounds for optimism. Indeed, the PSOE's leader, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, immediately announced his decision to step down once it became clear how poorly his party had performed, with his replacement due to be elected in July. His resignation was a clear acknowledgement of the PSOE's failure to mount an effective opposition to the PP since its defeat at the 2011 general election.

As for Podemos, alliances with other political forces may prove a feasible option over the coming period. Given that the Plural Left coalition could justifiably claim that it had done well at the European Parliamentary elections, trebling its number of MEPS, some kind of an alliance with Podemos remains a possibility. Indeed, overtures were made to Podemos in the immediate aftermath of the elections with a view to forming a 'grand coalition' capable of representing the majority of society. The forum for deciding this and other questions will be a 'grand citizens' assembly' to be held in the autumn, which can be viewed as the next essential step in deciding Podemos's future course.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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